



TIPS TO
MOTORHOMING IN
CHINA

By Harriet Halkyard #85830

“We had driven all over the United States in our little class-C and had even taken it on a 99-day trip from Houston to Panama and back. How hard could it be to drive around China?”

I did some research and eventually resorted to a Chinese friend to locate a rental company. We found a 22-foot class-C, including gas, for \$150 a day. It sounded like a deal.

Then our friend told us that he and his fiancé were going to join us.

The next week he told us that he had invited his thesis advisor.

Then we learned that the rental charge also included a driver.

Anyone who has lived in a motorhome for longer than a tailgate party knows that, however large the rig, it is actually built for two.

My loving husband, John, said not to worry; it was only for five weeks.

We got pictures of the shiny new rig, and I commented on the complete lack of storage and that I could not see a stove.

John said not to worry. It was just the camera angle.

Two weeks before our departure date, we got an extensive inventory. Our friend translated and read off everything from sheets to screwdrivers. Not quite everything. “I didn’t hear you mention cups or towels.”

My husband said not to worry; they must be there.

When we arrived at the rental agency’s lot, there was one rig, a rather battered five-year-old motorhome.

Our Chinese friend then informed us that his fiancé was not well, and they would not be coming. We expressed our regrets but could not help being relieved there would be fewer people. He then informed us that because we didn’t speak Chinese (no kidding), he had arranged for an interpreter.

Neither the interpreter nor the driver would sleep in the vehicle.

I took a deep breath and climbed on board the motorhome.

There was no stove.

With great smiles, a single hot plate was produced, and I was guaranteed that I could cook anything on it.

We checked out the rig and found the fridge was not working. We were told that it had just been turned on and that by the time we had done our shopping, it would be cooling.

We went to the local Wal-Mart; yes, they had one in Kunming, and we bought the basics of food along with the other missing essentials.

The fridge had not cooled down. There was not another rig available. It boiled down to whether we wanted to tour China or go home.

We wanted to continue our trip.

We were promised that the driver would get us fresh ice every day.

We headed out. Our first stop was the ice house. It was closed for lunch.

The driver packed the containers with snow from a pile that had been dumped in a corner.

Could this get worse?

John said not to worry.

In fact, the worst was over. Yes, it was a dilapidated old motorhome, but Wen Wei, our driver, managed to keep it rolling. When the alternator died, he

made sure that we were plugged into a roadside stall that would provide power. He was usually able to park on a slope, so we only had to push-start a couple of times until he got it fixed.

Everything that could break did, from the bed to the water pump, but our smiling hero fixed it or tied it up with bailing wire. He spoke no English but soon learned what thumbs down and “problem” meant. Later he would show thumbs up, grin so his eyes completely disappeared and say, “No pwoblem.”

Our goal was to drive to Mt. Everest. We started in Kunming, in the tropical province of Yunnan. We were to travel the southern section of the Silk Road, known locally as the Tea-Horse trading route. Kunming is the center of the prime tea-growing area, which they traded for Tibetan horses.

We did not know that the Lonely Planet and official Chinese travel authority described our intended route as one of the most beautiful and most dangerous in the world.

There were no campsites.

The first night, we found a paved corner of a town square behind some charming tea houses and pulled in for the night. It was a clear evening, and locals were strolling with children and

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Tip #1: Expect nothing to be provided that is not in writing.



performing tai chi. I decided to walk around the block.

I paused outside a little shop that sold tea, much of it compressed into inch-thick disks like giant coins for easier transportation. There was a group of people sitting in the back who beckoned me in to join them. They were drinking tea and immediately poured me a minute cup, smaller than an egg cup. The lady of the house was conducting a traditional tea ceremony for her family, and I had been welcomed. I shared postcards of Texas and made each person a balloon crown, which caused laughter all round. They reciprocated by presenting me with two of the little cups from a shelf in her shop.

Without a word in common, we had made friends and they had welcomed me to China. This trip was going to be a delightful experience.

Tip #2: Be open to new ideas and be willing to enter the lives of the friendly people who surround you.

Those were only the first of many people who spontaneously invited us into their lives. All along the road, we were greeted with smiles and waves. On the chilly grasslands of Tibet, we were invited into a yurt by a family of nomads. They move this tent home every two months to take their yaks to better grass.

There was a high ring of stones cemented together with dung, to prevent the wind from entering underneath the yak hair fabric. The center was open to the sky to draw the smoke up. There are no trees in this part of the country, so the nomads mold dung into round bricks to use as fuel. All over Tibet, various-shaped fuel bricks can be seen on roves and stuck on walls to dry. It was the natural use of a natural product even in the smartest of houses.

Each night, our interpreter and driver found an acceptable place to park. They were often in the large gated parking lot of the hotel, and the rental company picked up any charges.



Tip #3: Ask yourself if you really need a motorhome, or would a four-wheel-drive SUV be better?

A good reason for renting your own rig is that you don't have to eat noodles for breakfast. For me, the real benefit was that I had my own toilet. Chinese bathrooms do not always have a commode, just a hole to squat over, and there is a different standard of cleanliness.

On the other hand, staying in hotels would have been less expensive and an SUV would have been better on the bad roads. There were only a couple of times when we were not near a restaurant.

Tip #4: Always carry toilet paper and hand sanitizer.

Although we had breakfast in the motorhome, we usually ate out for lunch and dinner. Restaurants were plentiful, and the food changed depending on

the area and what was available. We declined larvae the size of thumbs, but John did enjoy yak burgers and pepper yak steak. In Tibet, the traditional diet consists of “tampsa” and yak-butter tea. “Tampsa” is ground roasted barley you moisten with yak butter and make into balls with your fingers. It tastes like salty cookie dough. Yak-butter tea is made with melted yak butter and yak milk and served hot. Coming inside from the freezing plateau, this could be a comforting rich drink. To me it was like drinking melted butter.

Tip #5: If you have to have corn flakes for breakfast, take your own supply.

Restaurants in China would often display fresh produce like vegetables or live fish and snails in tanks outside so you could point to what you do and do not want. The good news was that I seldom had to cook. Only twice, when we were way out in the wilderness, was my offer to make everyone packet noodles accepted. However, when I told Wen Wei that I only had forks (shiny and new from Wal-Mart), he laughed and walked away shaking his head to make his own chopsticks from a nearby tree.

Tip #6: Make sure you have a good driver.

We were lucky to have Wen Wei, who used to drive gasoline trucks and was a notably careful and polite driver. The interstate highway, National 214, north of Shangri La, was breathtaking. The motorhome wheels knocked rocks into cloud-filled canyons three thousand feet deep and then dropped into potholes, making me gasp. When I was not holding my breath, the scenery was dramatic and worth every minute of anguish.

Near the village of Gingko, thousands of rice paddies, some only a yard wide with little dykes trampled by generations of feet, stepped up the hillside.

Farther north in Yunnan, we came to sweeping valleys of soft green sugar cane planted in terraces that followed the contours of the mountains. Each ter-

race was marked with the nodding heads of sunflowers like sleeping sentries.

Tip #7: Be flexible regarding your route and schedule.

We think we were the first motorhome on some of these roads, and there was no way we could cover the distances that had been planned by the rental agency. On more than one day, we were scheduled to cover two or three hundred miles over dirt roads where we averaged 20 miles an hour.

Some of the roads were excellent and there are not many private cars, so traffic was light years away from the big cities. On the major tollways, we had to keep 200 meters from the car in front so there was little chance of getting rear-ended.

Most of the roads we drove on consisted of winding two lanes of blacktop with no shoulder. We also traveled for a couple of days on carefully laid cobbles, so as you progressed it felt like a weight-loss vibrator. (We each lost 15 pounds.) There were carelessly carved dirt paths cut into mountainsides, and one time we drove across a desert where we could hardly see the tracks we were to follow.

Harriet and John Halkyard learned about living in a motorhome while touring Central America. They share their knowledge and experience to encourage others to enjoy wonderful countries and fascinating people. They have written a book entitled *99 Days to Panama*, an Exploration of Central America by Motorhome. Visit www.99daystopanama.com to read more about their travels.

Tip #8: Ask your driver to check with other drivers regarding the road conditions every time you stop.

Landslides slowed us down, and three times in one day we had to turn around and go a different route because the road was closed. We were delayed for a day at a landslide.

Tip #9: Get an interpreter who is local to the area.

Even in Beijing, if away from the major attractions, very few people speak English, and in Tibet they do not speak Mandarin. We changed interpreters at the border so that we never faced communication barriers. Having a local on board enabled us to learn about the customs and points of interest in the area.

Tip #10: Take a good camera with plenty of storage.

We camped on an expansive grassland, watching as the sun painted Mt. Everest pink beneath the arc of a rainbow.

You can't beat that! 